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AUTHOR Brown, Jane; And Others
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ABSTRACT

This pamphlet contains information designed to assist those who write about the elderly and their role in society. The various sections provide background facts and figures concerning such issues as housing, economics, health, leisure activities, and women; specific story ideas; guidelines for interviewing the elderly; ways of eliminating stereotypes from writing; and lists of references. An appendix contains a list of agencies related to the elderly, especially in Michigan. (FL)

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WRITING ABOUT THE ELDERLY

Facts, Sources and Background Material for the Journalist

By
Jane Brown, Susan Haas and John Stevens

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This booklet was developed in cooperation with Carl Brahce, Associate Research Scientist at the Institute of Gerontology and Associate Professor of Education, under the Administration of Aging, Title IV A Career Training Grant, and the Department of Journalism at The University of Michigan and published by the Howard R. Marsh Center for the Study of Journalistic Performance in 1978. The material is *not* copyrighted, and reproduction of any part in permissible, but please give credit to the source.

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INTRODUCTION

Mass media are focusing increased attention on issues relating to the older segments of our population. Such subjects as social security, retirement, health care and housing are of interest not only to those over 65, but also to the rest of the population. All of us need to reassess our view of the elderly and their participation in society.

This booklet presents some basic facts to aid the person who must write about these topics. There are lists of references, most of which will be available in your local library, plus specific story ideas which can be developed. You will find guidelines for interviewing the elderly, a short discussion on eliminating stereotypes from your stories, and in the appendix, a list of agencies related to the elderly population, especially in Michigan.

PART I
Some Background Facts and Figures

OVERVIEW

About one American in nine (23.5 million in 1977) has celebrated his or her 65th birthday. There are 2 million over the age of 85. The percentage is growing rapidly, since between 1970 and 1977, the 65-plus population increased by 18%, while the rest of the American population grew only 5%. When the next century dawns, there will be 32 million older persons, representing 12.9% of the population. By contrast, there were only 4.1% of Americans over 65 in the year 1900. Of the elderly, 13.9 million are women and 9.6 million are men.

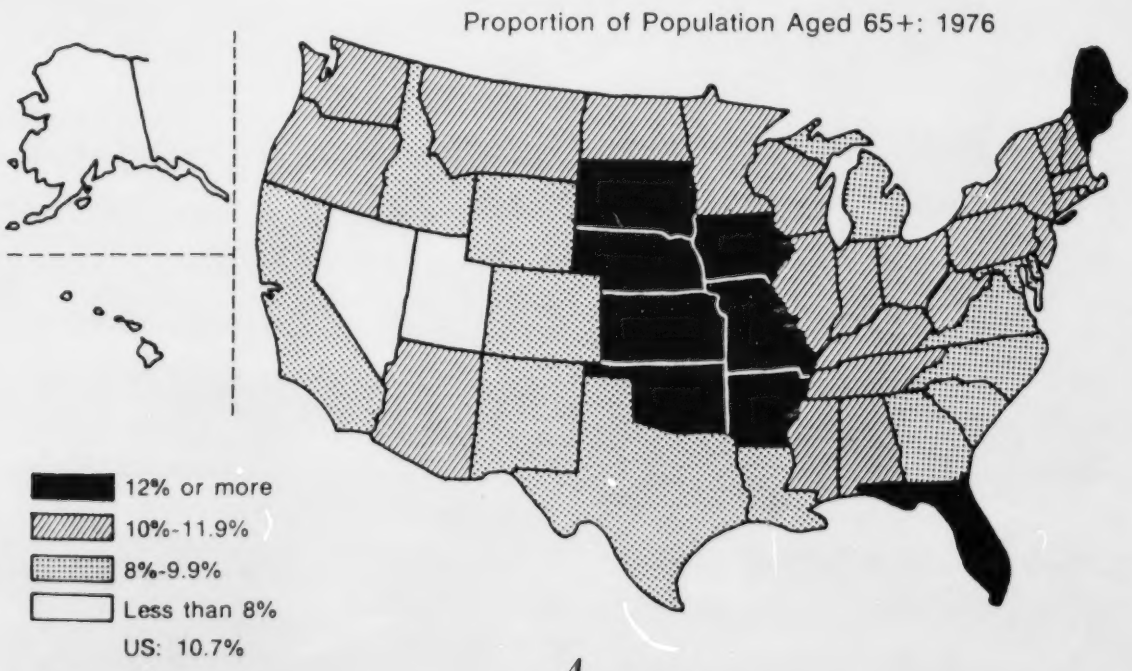
	Women	Men
U.S. Population	51.2%	48.8%
65 and older	59.2%	40.8%
85 and older	61.5%	38.5%

A female child born today can expect to live to age 76 and a male to 68; however, increased longevity is more a matter of infant survival rates than of anything else. Surprisingly, we don't live much longer (once we reach maturity) than our ancestors did. On the average, a woman who becomes widowed at age 65 will live another 16 years.

Reflecting different survival rates, in 1976 it was found that 11% of whites were 65 or older, while only 8% of blacks and 4% of Spanish-Americans were that old. After age 75, blacks have higher survival rates than whites.

Geographical Pattern

Almost a quarter of the elderly live in just three states; California, New York and Florida. Add Pennsylvania, Texas, Illinois, Ohio and Michigan, and these eight states account for almost half.



Elderly Population: Michigan 1970

Michigan does not have an especially high proportion of aged citizens, lower in fact than the states surrounding it. The state's 1.3 million seniors (defined by Michigan agencies as *60 and over*) are spread across Michigan as indicated at left.

HOUSING

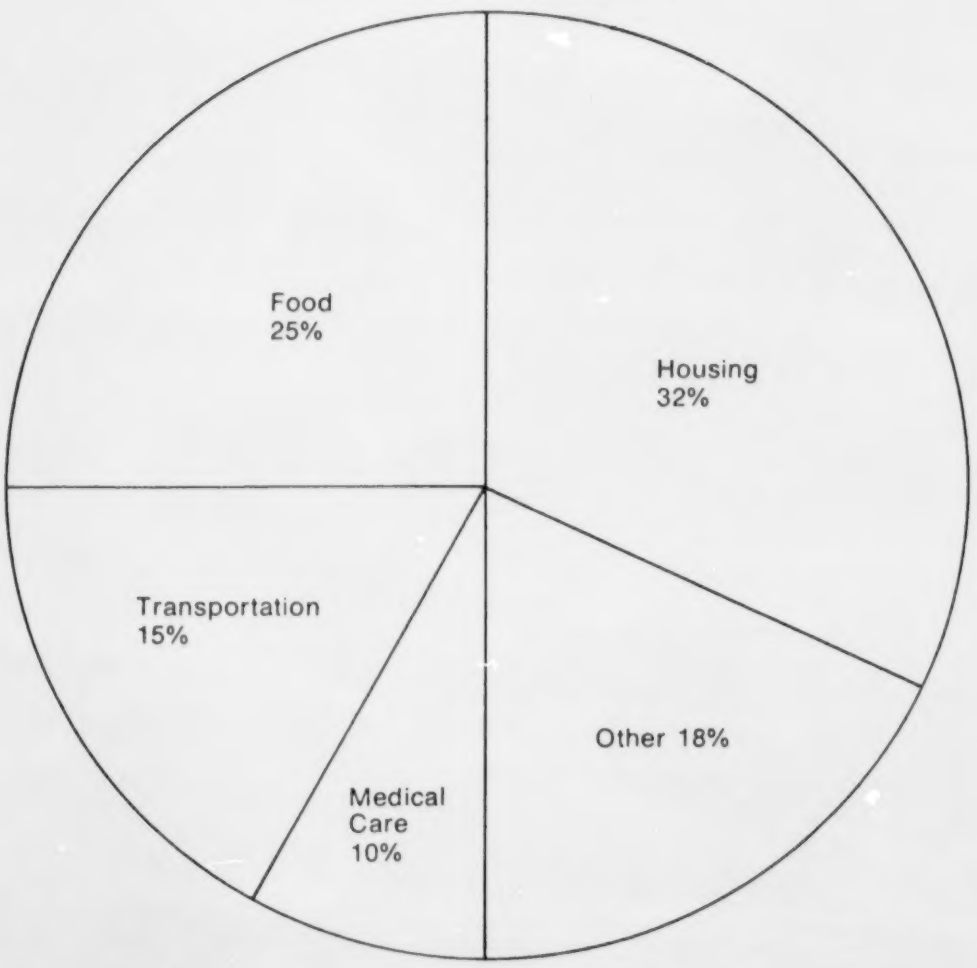
Only 5% of older citizens live in institutions. Of older men, 83% live in family settings, while 58% of older women do the same. Most of the others live alone, a few with non-relatives.

ECONOMICS

In 1976, the median income for those over 65 was $3,495. For a couple, it was $7,030. About 15% (3.3 million) live below the official poverty line, a dramatic improvement over 1970 when nearly one-quarter were below. As with society in general, women and minority group members have less income when compared to the rest of the elderly population.

The elderly represent a major market, spending relatively more on housing, food and medical care than younger consumers. Of food purchased for home consumption, they buy 13%. They also purchase 20% of the non-prescription drugs.

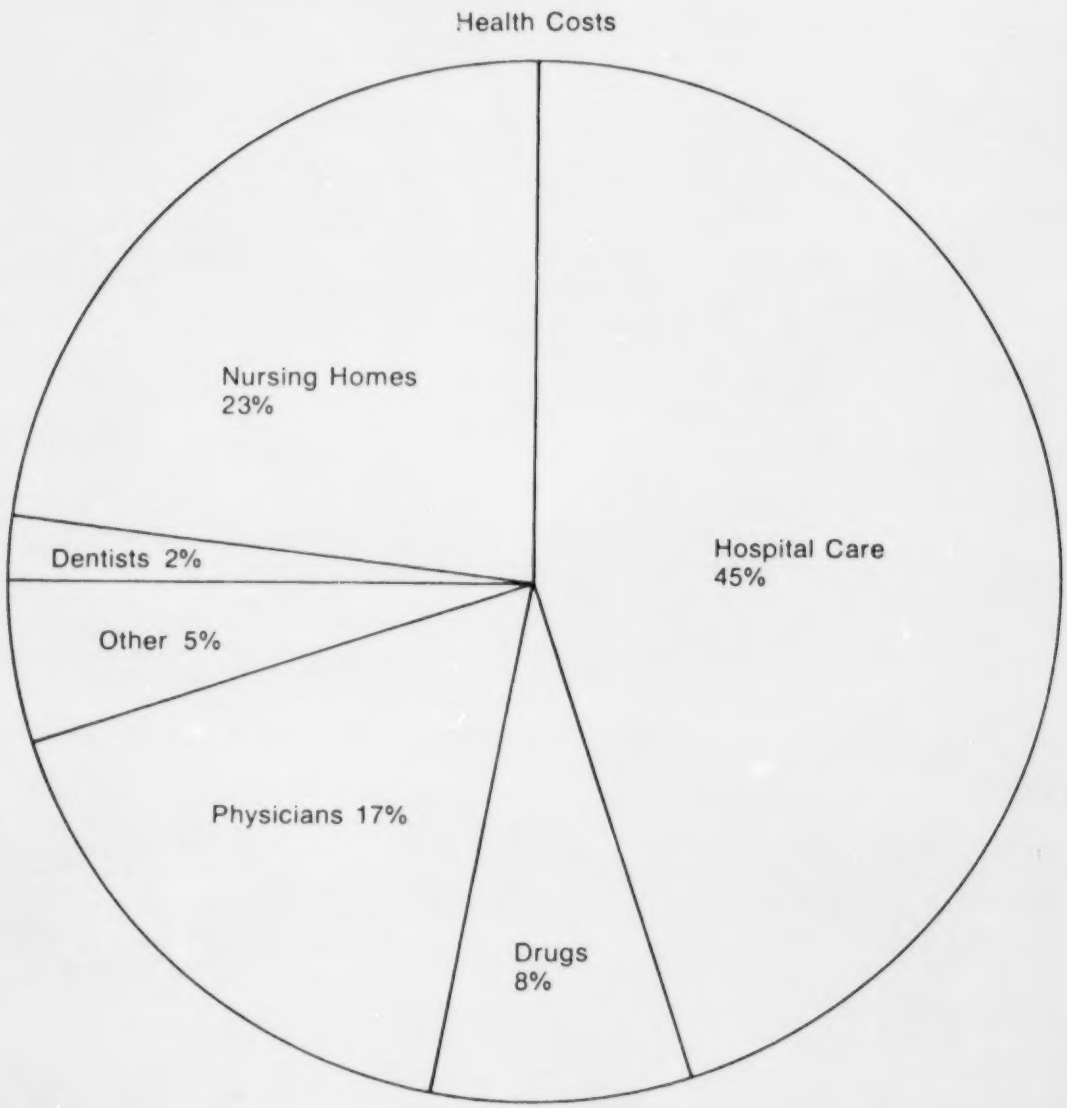
How They Spend Their Money



HEALTH

Not all older people are ill and infirm. In fact, 69% told Louis Harris pollsters that their health is good or excellent, while only 15% considered themselves in poor health. Only 5% report a chronic condition that confines them to a house, although 18% said such a problem limits their mobility.

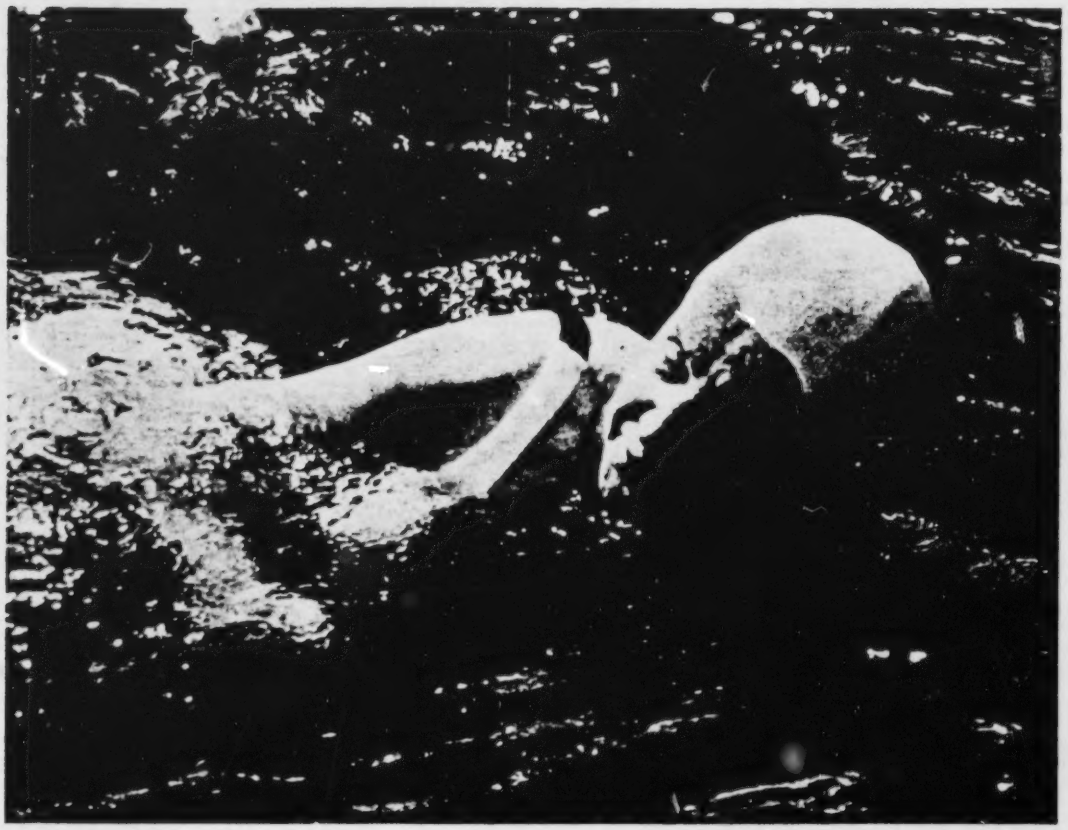
In 1976, the nation spent $120.4 billion on health care. On the average, those over 65 spent 3.5 times as much as others. These expenses were divided as follows:



Although older people go to the doctor more frequently (by about one-third) than others, nearly half have not seen a dentist in at least five years. While many have false teeth, others simply avoid going to the dentist.

Sexual Activities

Masters and Johnson found sexual desire and capacity continue well into the 80's for those in good health.



LEISURE ACTIVITIES

Most of those over 65 are busy with activities. Those who are busiest tend to be the happiest, although not nearly so many older people are unhappy as is supposed. In a recent survey, one-third said their senior years were better than they had expected, while only 11% thought them worse.

Patterns of leisure remain stable over one's lifetime. That is one reason experts on aging urge those in their middle years to develop rewarding and lasting interests and hobbies. Older people watch about as much television as the rest of society, something like three hours a day. Their next most popular leisure activities are visiting friends, gardening, walking and doing handiwork.

Nearly one-fourth (22%) of seniors do some sort of volunteer work. Those with higher income and more education do so more frequently.

Family Relationships
A 1975 study found 80% of the elderly had seen some family member within the last week, usually children or grandchildren. 81% had living children and 75% grandchildren. Nearly half of the elderly help their children or grandchildren financially. Many others run errands, babysit and assist in other ways.

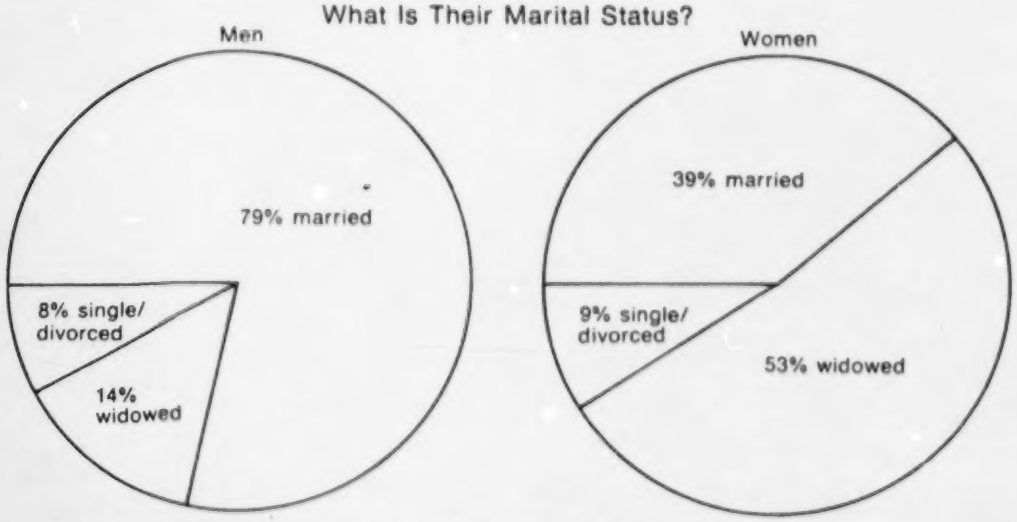
Education
Of today's 65-and-older population, 37% have completed high school and 8% college. Both figures are increasing dramatically. The percentage of high school graduates doubled between 1960 and 1975. In 1976, older persons had completed an average of 9 years of schooling. Some attend schools now, returning to complete requirements or to further some interest. It is estimated that 400,000 older people are enrolled in credit classes. Many take advantage of special reduced tuition rates.

Political Activity
Those over 65 vote at about the same rate as their numbers would predict. In one recent national election, they cast 16% of the votes, but comprised 15% of the voting age population. They vote in much higher proportions than the under-35 age group but somewhat lower than the 35-64 group.

WOMEN

In 1976, 79% of older men and 39% of older women were married, the dramatic difference accounted for the fact that 53% of the women were widowed. There are 5½ times as many widows as widowers in the United States. Also remarriage rates are much higher for older men.

What Is Their Marital Status?



The above facts were gathered from the following sources:

Louis Harris and Associates. *The Myth and Reality of Aging in America*. Conducted for the National Council on the Aging. Washington, D.C., 1975.

Special Committee on Aging. United States Senate. *Developments in Aging: 1977.* Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.

United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Office of Human Development, Administration on Aging. *Facts About Older American, 1977.* National Clearing House, Washington, D.C.

Reference Books

Here are a few recent books in the field which those who write on topics related to older Americans may find especially valuable. Some of them probably should be in your newspaper library or near your desk. Many contain good bibliographical leads to other sources, as well.

Atchley, Robert. *The Sociology of Retirement.* NY: John Wiley & Sons, 1976.
Effects on the individual—socially, biologically, physiologically and financially. Stress pre-retirement planning.

Binstock, Robert H. and Ethel Shanas. *Handbook of Aging and Social Sciences.* NY: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1977.
A basic reference with multidisciplinary focus.

Butler, Robert N. *Why Survive? Being Old in America.* NY: Harper & Row, 1976.
More popularly written recent summary of public and private programs. Useful appendix.

Butler, Robert N. and Myrna I. Lewis. *Aging and Mental Health.* St. Louis: C. V. Mosby, 1977.
Practical approaches to improve diagnostic and treatment.

Comfort, Alex. *A Good Life.* NY: Crown, 1976.
Non-technical, affirmative view of the elderly.

Harris, Lous and Associates. *The Myth and Reality of Aging in America.* Washington: National Council on Aging, 1975.
Extensive national attitude survey provides excellent leads for local stories on many aspects of aging.

Munnell, Alicia. *The Future of Social Security.* Washington: Brookings Institute, 1977.
Careful history of program with suggestions for reform.

Neugarten, Bernice L. *Middle Age and Aging.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968.
Clearly describes social and psychological processes in second half of life.

Schwartz, Arthur N. *Survival Handbook for Children of Aging Parents.* Chicago: Follett, 1977.
Broader than the title, a basic guide to understanding the elderly and the aging process.

Some Recent Articles

"Grow Old With Me! The Best Is Yet To Be." *Psychology Today,* Dec., 1971.

Mann, James. "End of the Youth Culture: Changes It Will Bring." *U.S. News & World Report,* Oct. 3, 1977.

Housing

Hennessy, T. "The Sun Shines Bright on Their Arizona Home." *Detroit Free Press,* Oct. 31, 1976. (Sun City, AZ.)

Wax, Judith, "It's Like Your Own Home Here." *N.Y. Times,* Nov. 21, 1977

Economics

Reinhold, Robert. "Wide Changes in Economy and Way of Life Expected as Median Age of Americans Rises." *N.Y. Times*, Feb. 6, 1977.

Rosenbaum, David E. "Debate on Social Security." *N.Y. Times*, Oct. 2, 1977.

Shapiro, Harvey D. "Do Not Go Gently." *N.Y. Times Magazine, Feb. 6, 1977. (Forced retirement)*

Woodring, Paul. "Why 65? The Case Against Mandatory Retirement," Saturday Review, Aug. 7, 1976.

Health

Bylinsky, Gene. "Science on the Trail of the Fountain of Youth." *Fortune*, July, 1976.

"No Telling How Old Is Old." *Time*, Oct. 10, 1977.

Rosenfeld, Albert. "Are We Afriad of Living Longer? The Strange Resistance to Aging Research," *Saturday Review*, May 27, 1978.

Activities and Leisure

"Gray Panther Power." *Center Magazine*, March/April, 1975. (Interview with founder Maggie Kuhn)

McCracken, James A. "The Company Tells Me I'm Too Old." *Saturday Review*, Aug. 7, 1976.

Women

"How To Fight Age Bias." *Ms*, June, 1975. (Lists groups and publications for older women)

Jar.eway, Elizabeth. "Breaking the Age Barrier." *Ms*, April, 1973.

Tavris, Carol. "The Sexual Lives of Women Over 60." *Ms*, July, 1977.

PART II
Suggestions for the Reporter

There are certain things which a reporter must keep in mind in interviewing and writing about older persons. Many are common sense but do have special importance in handling this kind of assignment.

Avoiding Stereotypes
A stereotype is a standardized mental picture representing an over-simplified opinion, emotional attitude or uncritical judgment of a person, group, race, issue or event. Often they are cliches, hackneyed expressions, or colloquialisms such as "little old ladies in tennis shoes," "crinkly-faced," or "old folks." Beyond that, stereotypes damage members of the groups both because they may impair self-esteem or limit aspirations, but also because others may ignore, ridicule, ostracize, or discriminate against members of the group based on an inaccurate expectation rooted in the stereotype.

How often do we see old people in our every day life? The media are in a unique position to portray the diverse members of these groups.

What can a reporter do?
First, a reporter must go beyond official sources for news. Seek out the spokesperson or expert. Find out how your community takes care of its elderly. It is not necessary that all your stories be positive. There may be corruption. All aspects of aging are not positive. Most people lose some of their sensory acuity as they age; most suffer from some chronic disease such as arthritis. But try for some stories about someone who has overcome many of the problems, or have a story about the new Senior Citizen Center.

Second, when writing, watch both your tone (a bit tongue-in-cheek or ill-concealed amazement or condescending?) and your choice of descriptive words. For example in a story about Princess Alice turning 94 we find:

> "Prince Charles once included her in an opera party of young people and she was as vivacious and interested as any of them."

Does that not imply that we shouldn't expect a person of her age to be vivacious, let alone as interested as a young person? Third, within the story, be fair and show the older people as the unique, diverse human being he/she is. (Rose is a bundle of energy.) All people have flaws, problems, delusions, as well as achievements and attributes which set them off from others (which probably is why you are doing the story in the first place). Describe the total person, not just pieces which fit your or your reader's preconception or expectations or which tickle their fancies.

> "Grandmother Named Ambassador." Maybe she is a grandmother but the more appropriate piece of her own human puzzle is that she is a career diplomat. This is an example of unfortunate emphasis on "oddity" as news element when "impact" or "prominence" might have been more appropriate.

Sins of omission are committed when you neglect stories or issues of importance to the elderly. Learn about the elderly in your community. Learn to recognize issues important to them. Report on these issues, both for your audience members who are old now and for those who will be old. When you write about the elderly you may commit sins of commission—you may let your stereotypes and preconceptions influence how you describe the older persons. Each older person is a unique individual. Cliches,

stereotypes and hidden assumptions of inactivity, asexuality, disinterest, or perpetual good or bad humor are innacurate and bad journalism, regardless of the subject.

Interviewing Guidelines

Older persons, like younger persons, need to feel at ease while they are interviewed. For the older person, the glare of light, the clacking of typewriters, and the interruption by colleagues, can be especially distracting. If you can arrange your interview in the best possible setting, you will be far ahead.

1. Explain who you are, why you are interviewing, and the probable date the story will appear.
2. If you sense a hearing problem try to pitch your voice within normal range but as low as possible. Sit close and look directly at the person, enunciating clearly. A loud or harsh voice can be quite unpleasant to the hard of hearing.
3. Keep your questions distinct from one another. Allow for response time. Sorting through answers, for some older persons, can take longer than for younger people: the more experiences, the more information to sort through.
4. Be alert for signs of weariness. Many older persons out of courtesy (or sometimes out of loneliness) will continue longer than they should, for either their own good or for yours. You may want to schedule another interview later.

PART III
Story Ideas

This list suggests the kind of stories which can be developed in most communities. The articles and books in this booklet will provide useful background, but the stories all need localizing—something that only you can do.

1. What is it like to live in your community as an older person today, compared with what it was like 25 years ago? Consider not only the economics but the social and other aspects. Don't limit yourself to the formal aid programs, but take into account the quality-of-life factors—the senior citizen organization, public attitudes, variety of living arrangements, and such "fringes" as free checking accounts, reduced bus fares, and special ticket prices. What are the prospects for 25 years from now?

2. What proportion of elderly are institutionalized in your community? (Nationally, it is only 5%) What are the costs to the public and to individuals of alternative arrangements and programs, such as "day care"? Talk to some of the older people who have opted for each, as well as to administrators. How does the level of such activity compare with other cities and counties? Describe daily life in different types of settings.

3. What are the advantages and problems of multi-generational homes? Talk with children, parents and grandparents, and include lots of anecdotes. Many seniors assist financially, as well as in other ways. Some live this way out of necessity, but many do it out of choice. Make comparisons with those who live independently.

4. Are there more elderly women or men in your community? Consider the economic, social, transportation and physical problems which are different. Case studies, possibly composites, might make these differences vivid. Consider the special problems of the widow. Are there clubs and organizations to help ease these problems? Talk with the director of the local senior citizen center.

5. How are the elderly Blacks, Jews, Hispanic and Native Americans, etc. cared for in your area? What proportions do they constitute in local institutions and nursing homes? Are there special clubs and organizations for them?

6. Where do the older people live? Use local statistics to map the unevenness, and then explain the reasons. What are the implications for businesses and public officials, and what are the prospects for changing patterns?

7. What progress has science made toward discovering a "cure" for old age? Information in articles can be translated into local terms by talking with scientists nearby. What are the implications for society in general, and your city and state in particular, if we do dramatically extend lifespans?

8. What should older persons do to maintain their health? You can develop a checklist from your reading and get local doctors or health officials to expand. In the process, you can describe special health problems of the aged.

9. What local doctors or clinics serve the special needs of the older citizens? Is this by policy or a matter of location? Talk with the doctors about the economics of such health care and about the involvement of various levels of government. Is

there really unnecessary "red tape" that discourages such practice? Get the other side from officials.

10. Who treats sexual problems of the elderly in your area, and what are they? Compare the problems of older women and men in terms not only of physical dysfunctions, but also in view of changing public attitudes and morals. Sex is a life-long matter and needs to be shown that way.

11. How active are the elderly in local politics? Party leaders can give you statistics and refer you to especially active persons. How often do they vote, compared with younger persons? Have they organized to pressure politicians in your area on behalf of retirement benefits, nursing home reform, etc.?

12. Do the Gray Panthers or other senior activist groups have chapters in your area? Talk with leaders about programs and goals. How do outsiders view them?

13. What are the effects of rising property taxes on those over 65 who own their own homes? Are there special tax incentives to them, or must many of them sell to escape the burden? When they sell, where do they go—to a cheaper home, to an apartment, or to another community? What are the long-term effects on the stability of your city or county?

14. What does a retired person or couple need to live in your area? Break down the costs and compare them with other communities, especially those in the Sun Belt. Talk with some elderly persons who have stayed and some who chose to leave. How much poverty is there, and how is it defined? How much of this is among the elderly, and especially among elderly in minority groups?

15. How should those in middle age prepare for retirement? There are more than finances to consider. For example, there is staying healthy and developing interests to carry over into later years. How many plan second careers, either for pay or as volunteers? Talk with professional people, wage earners, and the self-employed for contrasts.

16. Is early or mandatory retirement creating unrealistic demands on private pension plans? Consider the effects of recent and projected state and federal laws in this area. How do such plans impact on your community and its elderly, and what is the future for private plans? Talk with large local employers for view on their own plans.

17. What percentage of people in your community receive Social Security and related benefits? What are the projections? Do local recipients view their checks as money earned, welfare or a form of pension? What is it? Will there be money in the fund when the present wage earners get ready to collect?

18. Do working women receive their fair share from Social Security? What happens to benefits with marriage, divorce and remarriage? How have the laws changed on these matters, and what is the local impact?

19. What programs and services do the public schools, community colleges, and private institutions provide? How are they financed? What incentives are utilized to encourage older persons to participate? What benefits result for them?

20. How do school children view old age? A teacher might elicit opinions in themes or in drawings about what life will be like when these children are 65. Or the children might write about or discuss what they think of when they hear words like "elderly" or even "grandparent."

GOVERNMENTAL AGENCIES

There are three key federal agencies with names so similar that they often confuse the outsider.

The *Administration on Aging* (AoA) coordinates all federal programs for older people. It is headed by the Commissioner on Aging.

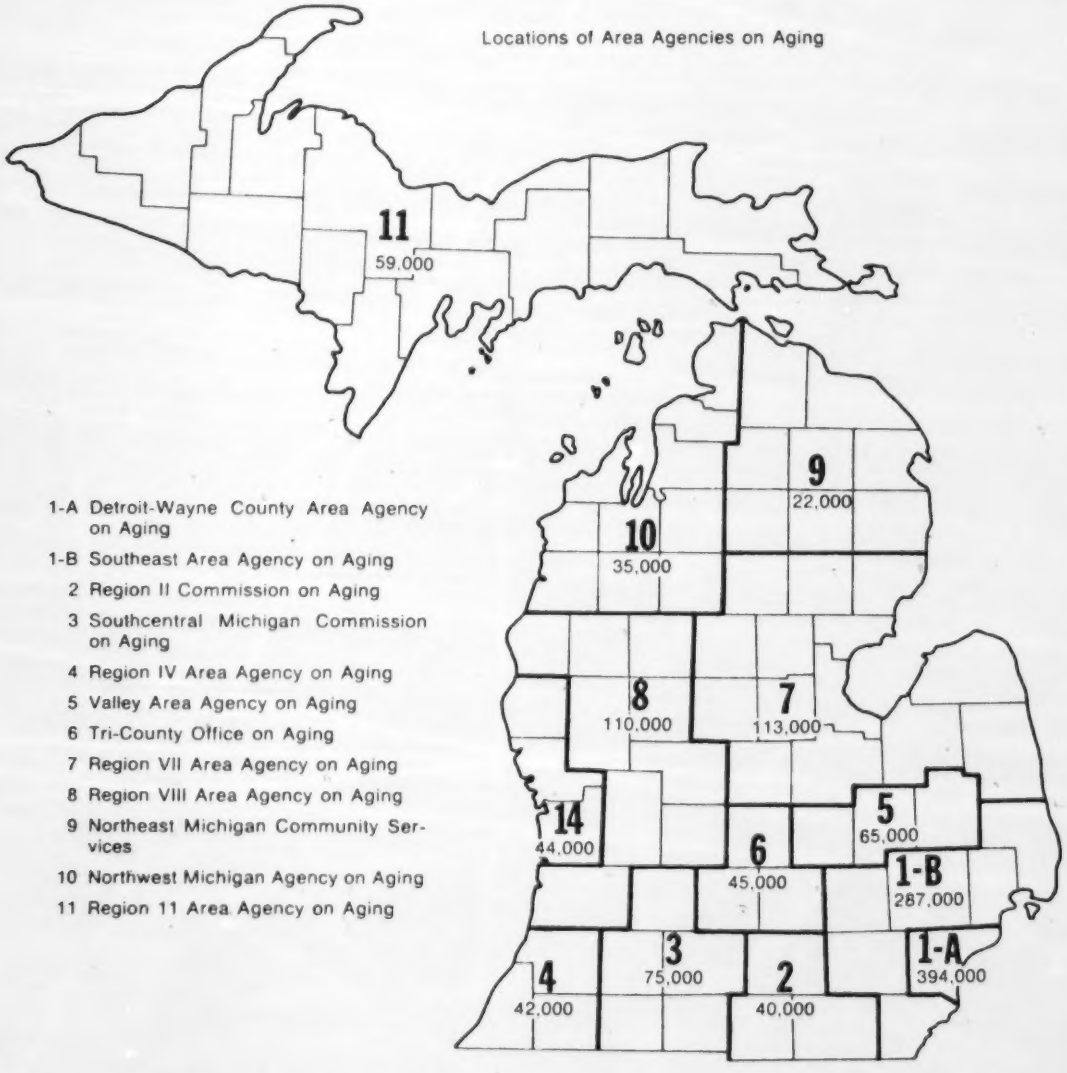
The *Federal Council on Aging* (FCOA) is a separate agency but is staffed by AoA. The President appoints the 15 members, including the Secretary of HEW and the Commissioner on Aging.

The *National Institute on Aging* (NIA) studies biomedical and behavioral aspects of aging.

The Older Americans Act of 1965 also mandated state agencies, which in turn have area offices.

The *Office of Services to the Aging* for Michigan is 300 East Michigan, PO Box 30026, Lansing, 48913. (517) 373-3230.

Locations of Area Agencies on Aging



1-A Detroit-Wayne County Area Agency on Aging
1-B Southeast Area Agency on Aging
2 Region II Commission on Aging
3 Southcentral Michigan Commission on Aging
4 Region IV Area Agency on Aging
5 Valley Area Agency on Aging
6 Tri-County Office on Aging
7 Region VII Area Agency on Aging
8 Region VIII Area Agency on Aging
9 Northeast Michigan Community Services
10 Northwest Michigan Agency on Aging
11 Region 11 Area Agency on Aging

AREA AGENCIES ON AGING

Detroit-Wayne County Area Agency on Aging 3110 Book Building 1249 Washington Blvd. Detroit, MI 48226	(313) 224-0960
Area Agency on Aging 1-B 29508 Southfield Road Suite 100 Southfield, MI 48076	(313) 569-0333
Region II Commission on Aging 611 South Center Adrian, MI 49221	
Southcentral Michigan Commission on Aging Room 127, Connor's Hall Nazareth College	(616) 343-4996
Region IV Area Agency on Aging Peoples State Bank Building Room 8 St. Joseph, MI 49085	(616) 983-0177
Valley Area Agency on Aging 708 Root Street Room 110-Old Sears Building Flint, MI 48503	(313) 239-7671
Tri-County Office on Aging 206 E. Michigan Avenue Lansing, MI 48933	
Region VII Area Agency on Aging 971 Midland Road Saginaw, MI 48603	
Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan, Inc. Room 1108-Peoples Building 60 Monroe, N.W. Grand Rapids, MI 49503	(616) 456-5664
Northeast Michigan Community Services 275 Bagley Street Alpena, MI 49707	(517) 356-3474
Northwest Michigan Agency on Aging 426 E. Front Street Traverse City, MI 49684	(616) 947-8920
Region 11 Area Agency on Aging UPCAP Services, Inc. 118 North 22nd Street Escanaba, MI 49829	(616) 726-3900
Region 14 Council on Aging 1111 Fourth Street Muskegon, MI 49441	

ORGANIZATIONS PERTAINING TO THE ELDERLY

American Association of Retired Persons/National Retired Teachers Association, 1909 K. Street, N. W., Washington, D.C. 20049. (202) 872-4700.

The Gerontological Society, 1 Dupont Circle, Suite 520, Washington, D.C. 20036. (202) 659-4698.

Gray Panthers, 6342 Greene Street, Philadelphia, Pa. 19144. (215) 382-6644.

The International Federation on Aging, 1909 K. Street, N. W., Washington, D.C. 20006. (202) 872-4700.

The National Center on Black Aged, 1730 M. Street N. W., Washington, D.C. 20036. (202) 785-8766.

National Council on the Aging, 1828 L. Street N. W. Suite 504, Washington, D.C. 20036. (202) 223-6250.

National Council of Senior Citizens, 1511 K. Street, N. W., Room 202, Washington, D.C. 20049. (202) 783-6852

FURTHER INFORMATION

The Institute of Gerontology is one of the nation's centers for information on this topic, and reporters are invited to take advantage of its resources. Feel free to call with questions. The journalist also may find some of the following recent publications of the Institute of particular value:

Images of Aging in America: 1790 to the Present, by W. Andrew Achenbaum and Peggy Ann Kusnerz, 1978. $4.

The Black Elderly, by Joseph Dancy Jr., 1977. $4.

Protecting the Vulnerable Adult, by Elizabeth J. Ferguson, 1977. $6.

Effective Social Services for Older Americans, by Sheldon Tobin, S.M. Davidson and Ann Sack, 1976. $4.

No Longer Young: The Older Woman in America, by various authors, 1975. $2.95.

Gerontology: A Core List of Significant Works, by Willie M. Edwards and Frances Flynn, 1978. $7.

Media Resources for Gerontology, by Penelope Sahara in cooperation with U.M. Audio-Visual Center, 1977. $4.

Past Sixty: The Older Woman in Print and Film, by Carol Hollenshead, with Carol Katz and Berit Ingersoll, 1977. $3.

Education for Retirement: A Bibliography, by Woodrow W. Hunter, 1978. $3.

Humanistic Perspectives on Aging, by Walter W. Moss (ed), 1976. $3.50.

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